Chicken is King on Delmarva!

In the 800 square-mile, tri-state area on the eastern side of the Chesapeake, 11,000 persons are directly dependent on the $175-million-dollar poultry industry for their livelihood. But they are only a small part of the total number of people who get to use and spend this money.

Mrs. Wilmer Steele, of Ocean View, Delaware is generally credited with beginning the commercial broiler industry as we know it today. In 1923 she had the first then "out of season" young chickens, which found an immediate and high-priced market in the north. Before then, young chickens were not available until well into warm weather.

Poultry people on Delmarva believe they are not only the originators of the modern poultry industry - they think they are in the forefront of todays practitioners of America's most scientific agricultural technology.

Compared with Mrs. Steele's day, our modern poultry farming operation produces young chickens on a year-'round basis, taking about half as long to get a fryer to marketable age, putting it on the consumer's table at less than half the cost, and at the same time making it far more meaty and more tender. Where once it was an expensive, seasonal dish, young chicken variously called fryers or broilers today are the cheapest table delicacy in the United States.

The old advertising slogan "untouched by human hands" is almost a truism in Delmarva's poultry industry. From the time the fertile egg is laid until the chicken reaches the grocer, everything, through the many stages, is remarkably mechanized and on a vast scale.

On an average day, approximately 4½ million baby chicks go into large brooder houses. These chicks are usually a day old, or even just a few hours. They are hatched (which takes three weeks of carefully controlled incubation) in vast incubators, the largest of which have a capacity of over two million chicks at a time. The operations here are so mechanized that even the eggs

are lifted by mechanical devices working on a suction principle. The temperature and the humidity are regulated, automatically, to within a fraction of a degree. The eggs are turned at set intervals, automatically, and all operations are recorded for the hatcheryman.

Chicks are rushed to the brooder houses in specially designed, insulated vans. At their new homes they have automatic heat (gradually reduced, as they grow, from a beginning temperature of 95°), automatically get fresh water (with medication automatically blended in precise doses, when required), and are never without feed, because it is mechanically replenished as they consume it. Their waking, sleeping, even their freshair and eating hours are all dictated by time clocks, set to produce the bird research at the excellently staffed and equipped substations of the Universities of Delaware and Maryland show to be best.

Even the percentage of the chicks is controlled by IBM machines, which now are indispensible in poultry genetics. Today's chicken is the same species as that of Mrs. Steele's day. But there the resemblance ends. Young chickens were once exclusively the unwanted cockerels whose sisters were raised to lay table eggs. But today they are the result of careful breeding calculated to turn out the fastest-growing, quickest feathering, meatiest chicken that will thrive on the least feed and be most rapidly and economically separated from its feathers. It is a single purpose bird. Meat only.

In the cleaned and disinfected brooder house, the chick eats feed made up of literally dozens of ingredients, some is such a small quantity that only one or two ounces are used in a ton. These microingredients are essential. They and all the other elements of a balanced ration are carefully measured, blended, lifted, ground, even pelleted and then regroung into "crumbles" and finally weighed and packaged in mills, the most modern of which are almost completely automated. The newest development is bulk feed handling. Here the feed is directed into large silos, from which it is fed into vehicles like tank trucks,

which transport it to the farm's smaller silo-like bins, into which it is blown. As the chickens eat their feed, augurs automatically fill the reservoirs on the mechanical feeders.

Should the electricity be interrupted, almost spontaneously, generators can come into action, and everything can go on as usual until the flow from the regular plants is restored.

When the chickens are at just the right size for Mrs. Housewife, they are caught by hand and transported in loads of about 10,000 each to modern dressing plants. Before the chick is even born the dressing plant knows when it will get the full-grown chickens, even how much they will weigh, because that, like everything else in the operation, is carefully planned and computed in advance. At the plant, the live chickens are placed in mechanically activated shackles and, at a rate of up to 10,000 an hour, or up to 400,000 a week on a one-shift basis in the largest, are prepared for cooking. Supervising all of this, from the condition and health of the chickens to the spotlessness of the largely monel and stainless steel equipment, are doctors of veterinary medicine under the Department of Agriculture, guaranteeing both the healthfulness and cleanliness of the finished delicacy.

Despite tremendous expansion of poultry operations throughout the country, particularly in the deep South, Delmarva regards itself as the nation's pre-eminent poultry producer. Sussex County, Delaware (approximately 160 square miles) produces more chickens than any other county in the world, regardless of size, about 84 million, annually.

But perhaps the most unusual aspect of Delmarva is not the extreme modernity of its operation, but its old-fashioned cooperativeness and dedication to self-help. Fourteen years ago, all the various segments of the industry - farmers, hatcherymen, breeders, feed mills, equipment suppliers and manufacturers, the various distributors of necessary materials, the dressing plants - everybody in the poultry business - got together and organized the non-profit Delmarva Poultry

Industry, Inc. In this group they are not bitter competitors. They work together, like a super chamber of commerce, to help each other by educational and promotional work. Annually they raise well over$100,000. Thus they finance one of the most unusual farm groups in the world. The high-light of each year's effort is the Annual National Chicken Cooking Contest, co-sponsored with the Poultry and Egg National Board. This year it will be held at Seaford, Delaware, June 15, 16 and 17. Men and women, boys and girls in a junior contest, will come from most states and sometimes foreign countries. Their efforts will be judged by the nation's outstanding food editors and authorities.